

A Stranger Sleepover by frecklesandconstellations

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Summary: After the Snow Ball, Mike Wheeler decides to invite all his friends to a sleepover round at his. Contains popular ships. This is set just after season two, so will probably contain spoilers. Don't read unless you've watched all of Stranger Things on Netflix. Enjoy!

1. Chapter 1

• Chapter One: Basements and Blanket Forts •

Hi...

Welcome to A Stranger Sleepover, fan-fiction by Me! (positively *shook*). I wrote this cos I love Stranger Things like everyone else. (wow I'm so original & unique ^.^)

I'm not gonna do a super long 'Author's Note' cos that shit is boring lmao

All I will say is that this story is set straight after Season Two (so yes, spoilers), it is in the third person and,

* Don't read ahead for S2 spoiler *

I will be referring to Jane Hopper as Eleven still. This story is a lot more focused on the kids of the show, (e.g Dustin, Lucas, Mike) and I feel like it will have taken them a while to get used to calling Eleven by a different name. Just my opinion! Sorry if it doesn't float your boat. -_-

Anyway, without further ado, let's crack on with the story!

A STRANGER SLEEPOVER

Fanfiction by frecklesandconstellations

• Chapter One •

Basements and Blanket Forts

MIKE WHEELER waited eagerly in the basement of his house, chatting to Eleven and sharing some toffee popcorn with her. The girl had loved watching the brown seeds jump in the microwave, and enjoyed the sweet burst of toffee explode on her tongue. There was a plate stacked high with Eggos, some pots of chocolate pudding scattered randomly, and a bowl of fruit (Mike's mother had insisted on the kids being somewhat healthy) that was left untouched.

Tonight was one that would surely go down in history, Mike thought. After the success of the Snow Ball, he realised how much the gang

needed to get together and just relax after so many straining events, and he couldn't think of a better way to do it than a sleepover. He wanted to show Eleven what fun was, because she deserved to know, and he couldn't help but gaze at her in admiration while she chewed on her popcorn.

There was no one he liked more.

"Hey, El," Mike said after swallowing some popcorn. The short-haired brunette looked up with a smile.

"I think that when the others get here, we should build a fort - It would be so awesome!"

Eleven looked at him in confusion at the new word, and Mike quickly explained what fort meant to her. When he finished she was grinning broadly and nodding repeatedly. Mike was glad that she liked the idea.

Suddenly the doorbell rang and a woman's voice called down the stairs. "Micheal, Steve's here with your friends!" The unlikely pair grinned and ran to the front door, flinging it open. Will, Dustin, Lucas, Max and Steve stood on the porch, grinning back at the two. Mike's mum appeared at the doorway.

"So good to see you all!" She exclaimed in joy. "And you, Steve! Thanks for delivering them here, safe and sound like usual."

The older boy shuffled from foot to foot in the cold, burying his hands in his jean pockets and declaring 'You're welcome'. Ever since Steve had looked after the four kids so well before the Snow Ball, practically every mom in the neighbourhood counted on him to ferry around their children. Steve had reluctantly agreed to their favours, because he was being paid for it, and that made him happy. Mrs Wheeler handed him some money and wished him well.

"Mom, I'm going to stay over at Abbey's tonight, I haven't seen her in a while and I think it could be fun." A female voice called, before she appeared at the base of the steps, fastening her hair. The girl's eyes were made up, and her lips were tinted red. To anyone else it would seem obvious that it was not a friend's house she wanted to stay at,

but rather a boy's. Will rolled his eyes, knowing the truth. Nancy was going to see his brother, Jonathan.

Something like pain flashed across Steve's face, still lingering at the doorway, and he left before the older girl could notice he was there. Completely unaware, Mrs Wheeler wished her daughter well before shutting the front door behind her.

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"I vote for Dungeons and Dragons."

"We can't play that now - Max will beat us!"

"She's good at arcade games, Dustin, not necessarily board games.."

"Excuse me? I'm right here you know."

Mike, Will and Eleven exchanged weary glances as they listened to their friends arguing. Eventually Will shrugged and grabbed a waffle from the stack and Eleven did the same, glad for another Eggo. Mike breathed in deeply.

"Will the three of you cut it out?" He yelled, stunning the three into silence. "I have a better idea." Max, Lucas and Dustin turned around to face him with glares.

"I think we should build a fort!" Frowns were quickly replaced with grins that spread across the kids' faces as he said it. Looking at each other, they nodded in approval of his brilliant idea.

"Will and Dustin, you can look around down here and see if you can find any beanbags. The rest of us will go upstairs and get some blankets from the cupboard." After they all agreed, Mike grabbed Eleven's hand and they made their way up the stairs.

When they got there, Lucas and Max in tow, Mike took them to his mom's airing cupboard, which was stacked high with blankets, sheets and towels.

"We'll take these back." Max said to Mike, smiling in a friendly way. Lucas did a thumbs up behind her.

"Great. Me and El will look for some cushions." Mike told them, before heading into the lounge. Eleven let go of his hand when she spotted the funny chair that Mike's dad usually sat in; she ran towards it, giggling. The boy rolled his eyes at her playfulness but laughed when she pressed the button and it flung backwards, a look of amusement and delight on her face. Mike kissed her forehead gently, glad that she was back.

Once scooping up all the cushions they could find, the pair joined the rest of the group down in the basement. They had somehow managed to move the yellow sofa so that it would be inside the fort when they built it, and Dustin was pouring the contents of his backpack onto the table, spilling various snacks everywhere.

Lucas looked like he was about to say something, but then Max ran towards the snacks, picking up a few chocolate bars and scooping some of Eleven's toffee popcorn into her mouth.

"Thanks, guys!" she spoke through a mouthful. "We never have snacks this good at home."

After everyone had gotten something to eat, the group started to build their fort. Eleven placed the cushions in a circle, and then sat in it munching on another waffle. Dustin started hooking sheets and blankets onto anything that he could find; chairs, shelves, the stair handrail. Max parked her skateboard in the corner of the room, and Will brought out what seemed like hundreds of christmas lights from his bag, untangling the brightly coloured bulbs. The rest of the group stared at him a little oddly, before he remarked: "What? My mom doesn't need them anymore, now that I'm safe. We can use them to give the fort some colour." After a moment, Lucas nodded in agreement, then sat down to help Will detangle the rest of the lights, while Mike helped Dustin re-enforce the sheets so that the fort was stable. Eleven was still sitting in her circle of cushions, watching in awe of her friends at work.

"Are you gonna help us, El?" Mike questioned, laughing at her while she finished her waffle, still in her circle of cushions that she created. She looked up at him, then smiled while nodding. She helped Lucas and Will hang the lights around the growing fort, and then plugged them into the wall. After a split second, each bulb lit up with bright

colour and grins spread like wildfire.

"Great job, El!" Max stated, still trying to get the other girl to talk to her after she was ignored on her night of return. Eleven looked up and and unexpectedly smiled at Max for the first time. The redhead couldn't help feeling a burst of pride at the positive reaction, and Lucas walked past, giving her an awarding hair ruffle. This resulted an eye roll, but she felt a smile tugging at the corners of her lips.

Dustin and Will chatted about their favourite arcade games, and which ones they thought were the best.. Mike promised to take Eleven to an arcade soon, to show her what it was like. The idea excited her further.

"Lucas Sinclair on the line, any reports of trouble?" The boy with the bandana spoke into his walkie-talkie, and Mike's one crackled with electricity at the other side of the fort. He ran to go get it, lowered his voice and declared,

"We have a robbery sir, at the shop on Baker Street.." Eleven scooped up several boxes of Eggos from the floor and began running in circles around the fort, giggling uncontrollably. Dustin held an invisible steering wheel in his hands and 'drove' after the thief, with Will by his side. After several laps of running, the kids collapsed on top of the blankets and pillows in peals of hysterical laughter.

"I got you!" Will exclaimed while tickling Eleven as she rolled around on the floor, before Max batted cushions in their faces. The seams threatened to split and spill feathers all over the room as she did so, but no one noticed. Will's face burst into a grin and without hesitation the boy yelled "Pillow fight!"

Everyone grabbed a cushion or a pillow and started a very competitive game. Eleven made sure she didn't accidentally smack Mike in the face with her pillow, and was cautious to do the same. For everyone else, however, it was quickly game on, and they fought with no remorse. Will, being the smallest, managed to dodge every pillow that came his way, even the ones that Eleven lifted with her mind. Eventually, he was crowned winner, and Dustin went to fetch a plastic golden crown from the Wheeler's dressing up box, and it sat lopsidedly atop Will's head. He couldn't stop beaming while his

friends picked up feathers from the floor and sprinkled him in them like confetti, the outcome of a destroyed pillow.

Eleven's eyes shined; in this moment, Mike didn't think he'd ever seen the girl so beautiful.

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Hope you enjoy this lil story so far! I know loads of people absolutely adore Stranger Things, and rightly so, but no matter how hard I try I just can't seem to find any decent fanfictions for it. That's why I decided to write my own! If you do have any good ones though, please tell me in the comments :)

2. Chapter 2

• Chapter Two: Truth or Dare •

• Chapter Two • Truth or Dare

SOME TIME AFTER their crazy pillow fight, the group of six sat in a circle at the very centre of the fort, conducting ideas on what to do next. Max had suggested Truth or Dare in an outburst, and when the others eagerly agreed, they agreed to play it. Will went over the rules for Eleven, who seemed pretty scared of the game, but after a few reassurances from Mike she started to look a little less afraid.

It was Max who wanted to go first, so Dustin did the favour of asking the question.

"Max... Truth or Dare?"

The redhead picked dare as her challenge, and after a minute or so of pondering, Lucas nearly exploded with an idea.

"I dare you to ride down the hand rail by the stairs on your skateboard!" the boy nearly yelled with excitement. Accepting the dare, Max went to retrieve her skateboard while the rest of the group sat in anticipation, wondering whether or not the tomboy would pull it off. But as they watched her glide effortlessly down the banister without flaw, it became clear - the task was simply too easy for her. Everyone clapped when she'd finished, especially Lucas, before she rejoined the circle.

The game journeyed from person to person, each picking dares while becoming more hilarious as they went on. Dustin had to sing a very powerful ballad; Lucas had to steal one thing from Mike's parents room without them noticing (he took a hairbrush successfully), and Will had to do a pufferfish impression. All of it was horrendous, and when Mike's turn came around, he was tempted to pick dare also. However, the word 'truth' spilled out accidentally and he realised too late what he'd done.

"Hmm..." It was Dustin who wanted to ask the highly anticipated question, after discussing it in private briefly with the others. After a moment's hesitation, he asked (in a voice so quiet it could've been a whisper),

"Are you in love with Eleven?"

The silence that followed was unbearable - it stretched on with an unmistakable feeling of awkward lingering in the air. The tension strained the atmosphere in the basement as Mike thought long and hard about his answer, before he eventually replied:

"I guess so?...Yes. Yes, I am."

It seemed as if the whole room would explode out of joy and celebration, while Mike's face turned as red as a tomato. He found Eleven's hand and held onto it, while the girl laughed quietly by his side - for she did not know what the word love meant, but she understood its purpose: to confess just how much you liked someone. She knew that Mike liked her, and a lot - her feelings matched his entirety.

When the room had finally calmed down, only one person who had not been asked a question or given a dare remained: Eleven herself. When Mike asked her 'Truth or Dare', she closed her eyes in thought, wondering which to pick. After a silence that seemed to stretch on torturously for hours on end, she lifted her head, opened her eyes and whispered with a dangerous smile:

"Dare."

The room of people were a little shocked at her reply, certain that she would pick truth. Wondering what to dare her took longer thought, because, they questioned, what on earth do you dare a girl with powers? After a while, however, Max came up with something.

"Okay. There is a plate of cookies upstairs on the kitchen worktop," The girl elaborated to the other, "Staying here, try to use your brain to bring it down for us all to share. You got that?" The short-haired girl smirked in agreement, accepting the all-too-simple challenge.

Closing her eyes once again, Eleven cleared her mind to focus, imaging the plate of cookies. She balanced it so that it wouldn't sit on of the worktop anymore, and instead float perfectly in mid-air. She channelled everything within her to keep the plate afloat and bring it down the steps, the task proving harder to her than she originally thought.

Once it was at the base of the stairs, Eleven used her mind to lower the plate and land it gently. Feeling a trickle of blood running from one of her nostrils, she opened her eyes and wiped the blood on her sleeve without much thought. A little exhausted, the girl wearily leaned back into the cushions and rested, while Max (who had never seen the other girl use her powers before) let her jaw drop to the ground in amazed shock. The rest of the gang whooped in delight, hugging and congratulating Eleven for doing it.

"Here El, you can have two cookies cos that was soooo cool." Dustin smiled, offering them to the girl. She took them from his hands and timidly nibbled on them, a lack of energy limiting her slightly.

The group sat in a comfortable silence while they ate their cookies, relishing the moment of peace. Although it was not said, everyone felt a wave of relief wash over them now that things were back to the way they were - and that, in the end, was all that mattered.

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Thank you for reading so far! It really helps and I'm continuing to write more :)))

Leave a comment with your opinions xx

3. Chapter 3

• Chapter Three: Movies and toffee popcorn •

• Chapter Three •

Movies and Toffee Popcorn

SLOWLY, THE NIGHT got later and later as the kids played games, mucked around and had an overall good time. Will was the first one who began to feel the effect of staying up so late; proved by his consistent yawning. In the end he was so tired that he suggested watching a film in hopes of calming down his hyperactive friends, and fortunately for him they liked his idea. The six of them debated on which movie they wanted to choose, but finally picked *Star Wars*. Mike had reminded El of Yoda, and they picked up the Millennium Falcon toy ship from the floor to display to her, the excitement in their voices bright, and evident.

"So you're kinda like a Jedi, in a way." Dustin grinned, demonstrating to the brunette girl. "With you super powers and stuff.. it's pretty mental. But in a cool way."

Mike loaded his VHS of *The Empire Strikes Back* into the cassette player, his favourite of the trilogy. The famous yellow text against the starry black background exploded onscreen as the film began to play. Max shushed the boys, eager to watch for the first time while sipping on some squash. Mike quietly explained the plot to Eleven in her ear so that she understood, and she got the hang of it pretty quickly. She definitely enjoyed it, he resolved, and grinned each time Princess Leia did something. She was so stunned at the lightsaber duels between Luke and Darth Vader that she proceeded to clap when it ended, thrilled. Will, however, had completely passed out onto the cushions that surrounded him, snoring lightly every now and then. It was a peaceful sight, seeing their friend alive and well, causing a spark of hope to rise up inside of each of the kids in the basement. A small smile was etched upon his face; it would seem, at last, that the boy who went missing for an alarming amount of time was content.

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Lucas, who was in complete awe of Max, held her hand lightly, squeezing it whenever something 'scary' would happen. The redhead wasn't scared at all, and just rolled her eyes, but did not let go of his hand. They were happy watching the film together.

Mike kept sneaking glances at Eleven, and playing with her hair - not daring himself to believe she was really there. He'd remember the cold, lonely nights when he'd clasp onto his super-con walkie, tears rolling silently down his face in stupid, desperate hope that some sign of her would show, just to finally shut up the voices in his head telling him that she was gone. He remembered the hopelessness of it all, and that no one around him could ever really understand, and it saddened him. Some nights when he'd dream her so clearly, be so sure that she was there, only to wake up with the image of the girl erased from his mind.

At the sheer memory of it, his eyes began to well up and a single tear rolled down his cheek and splashed onto the carpet, causing him to fiercely wipe his face with the end of his sleeve. Dustin, Lucas and Max had all fallen asleep on each other, while Eleven's eyelids drooped with fatigue. Mike tapped her on the shoulder and she turned to face him, a puzzled yet curious expression on her face. He didn't have anything to say, the boy just wanted her attention. They were lying opposite each other, and there was nowhere to look other than each other's eyes. For a while they just lay there on their stomachs, legs crossing and waving around behind them - like Mike had seen Nancy do on her bed while on the phone to a friend. They just listened to the sounds of each other's breathing, the few seconds where they would inhale and feel the short tension, but then slowly exhale with relief. The pair slowly became more and more out of sync with each other, Eleven finding herself breathing in the same time Mike breathed out. A steady, frequent pattern.

"Mike," El spoke after a while, maintaining her focus on his wide, expectant eyes. He listened.

"When you said you were in love with me... did you mean it?"

The boy was a little startled by the unexpected intimacy of the question, but let a string of 'yes's and 'of course' words rolled off his tongue, as if the fact should've been obvious to Eleven. She nodded

slowly at his replies, using the time to process.

"I just wanted to be sure. Because I.. love.. you... too." She let the last word end in a smile, trying to flush out the awkwardness squirming inside her. It didn't matter though, because Mike was sure his heart melted a little bit right then, when his eyes welled up again and he pulled the girl into a hug. She smiled into his shoulder, inhaling his scent of jumpers and orange squash for a second before they detached and got into their separate sleeping bags. Both looked up at the ceiling as their eyelids fluttered between open and closed until it almost became a game: Which of them could resist the temptation of giving into their exhaustion for the longest? After a minute or so, Michael's breathing quietened, his long thick lashes resting on his freckled cheeks. He was snoozing peacefully. Eleven pressed a kiss to his forehead, and then, without hesitation, collapsed into a slumber.

4. Chapter 4

• Chapter Four: Necessary Shenanigans •

• Chapter Four •

Necessary Shenanigans

NANCY WHEELER was nervous. She'd left her house in a rush to escape her mom, letting some excuse play with her words as she did so. The curly haired girl was determined to talk to Jonathan face to face, even though she knew she could phone, because she wanted to see him. She hasn't since the Snow Ball, not after he left with his younger brother. Ultimately, Nancy wanted to see him because she liked him, and she admitted to herself that it was quite a lot. She hoped they could talk about each other, maybe for a little while, because she wasn't sure where their relationship was heading.

The door made a surprisingly loud noise when the girl knocked on it, hoping that Joyce Byers wouldn't be the one to answer. Nancy had a lot of respect for the woman, sure, but that didn't stop her from being a little afraid of the stressed mother. Her unwashed hair and dark eye bags frightened Nancy a little, even though she knew she was being stupid. Plus, it was nearly eight in the evening, which was probably too late, and she didn't want to disturb the mom who had already gone through too much. Thankfully, the door opened and it was Jonathan on the other side.

"Nancy? What are you doing here?"

The boy's eyebrows drew together in troubled confusion, and though Nancy knew the expression well, it didn't stop her from feeling a little sorry for the boy. He often looked washed out, or exhausted - she didn't know what to do to help, and it made her feel slightly hopeless.

"I... I just wanted to talk to you, I guess. I know I should've phoned, but the group are having a sleepover and I wanted to get away from the noise they were making, you know?"

Jonathan didn't look like he did, but nodded anyway. His eyes shifted

awkwardly from side to side, then after a moment, murmured: "Would you like to come in?" Nancy thought it would be impolite if she didn't, so she stepped reluctantly inside the little house.

The bungalow was still a bit of a mess, if she was honest to herself, but she tried not to let that matter. There were a few scraps of paper left in various places, covered in countless scribbles made by Will of the Upside Down.

"Where's your mom?" She asked carefully, and Jonathan simply replied with "Out.". The girl didn't press further.

Tactfully, Nancy took a seat on the couch. The multicoloured string lights had been removed, making the house look strangely bare, and there was yet another new phone resting on the wall. She knew that Jonathan's mother was going through a lot, dealing with the death of a man she loved, so Nancy excused the state of the place.

After a moment's hesitation, she asked:

"Are you ok?" And then mentally slapped herself for asking such a dumb question. Jonathan look amused at that, knowing she regretted what she said, and sat down with her.

"What do you think?" He asked, struggling not to laugh. It was ironic, he thought, because he was so clearly not alright and yet the very question threatened him to burst out laughing.

"It's bullshit." Nancy muttered, eyes casted down over her shoes. Having used the swear word many times before, it was a typical thing the girl would say on various occasions - She liked it.

"Right." Jonathan smiled slightly, then cautiously took her hand. "But things'll get better. They have to. I can't imagine a more shitty situation than the once we're already in." Nancy nodded in complete agreement.

"But I have my brother back. Again. And my mom... she's recovering. She's trying so hard. So really, it's looking up... in a way." The boy continued. "Do you know what I mean?"

After a moment, the girl looked up and into his eyes and smiled,

letting "yes" roll off her tongue. She didn't feel like things were getting better, but she tried to believe that they were, for Jonathan's sake. Then she smiled a little, her eyes lost in memory, thinking back to when she barley knew the boy she was sitting next to. Back when she was with Steve, and his friends, and Barb...

Her eyes glazed over, quick and sudden. Several tears rolled down her face at once, which she fiercely wiped away in shame.

"Nancy? Oh god, are you alright?" Jonathan asked, unable to keep the panic out of his voice. The girl repeatedly used her sleeve to wipe away the tears, but they kept coming, thick and fast. Not sure of what to do, Jonathan pulled her into a hug, stroking her hair and murmuring "It's gonna be ok" into her ear. The girl's sadness caused her whole body to shake, but he kept comforting her, even though he was scared.

"Barb..." she managed to say between sobs, memories of her best friend playing like home movies in her mind. Jonathan pulled away then, understanding her pain, and said fiercely:

"You can't let this keep hurting you. You can't. Nobody knew what would happen to her, no one knew how to stop it. We can't go back in time and change things, you understand? Just like we can't go back in time and save Bob."

Nancy stopped then, the last of her tears running silently down her cheeks. Jonathan used his thumbs to gently wipe them away, cupping her face with the palms of his hands.

"I hate seeing you so upset." He spoke after a moment, his voice breaking a little. "You were always so tough."

"I'm not tough." She laughed bitterly, gently removing his hands from her face.

"Yes you are, Nancy. Everything you've done for my family, for everyone... You are. Don't forget that, ok?" The boy barley whispered, tears in his eyes. Jonathan knew he wasn't very emotionally strong, but right now he didn't care, so he hugged the girl again. Kissing the top of her head a few times, he let his tears spill over, hoping she

wouldn't see. They stayed cuddled in that position on the sofa for what felt like hours, until Jonathan realised the girl had fallen asleep. With his eyelids heavy and his cheeks still damp, he spoke one last sentence before he drifted off to sleep:

"Don't forget it."

5. Chapter 5

• Chapter Five: Mishaps and Mayhem •

• Chapter Five •

Mishaps and Mayhem

HAWKINS, INDIANA was a place Steve Harrington never thought would become what it was now. A place where the impossible could happen, completely random and out of the blue. He certainly knew that none of it was meant to happen to *him*.

Steve knew what kind of person he was before, and he wasn't particularly proud of it. The mishaps that had happened somehow carved Steve into someone he didn't recognise, someone better and more caring, but he didn't know what to think of it. Heck, he was even the freaking babysitter of the town! A year ago he'd probably never let that happen.

But a year ago he was dating Nancy Wheeler, a girl he realised too late he took for granted, and now the weight of the truth crushed him like a ton of bricks. He didn't know if there was even a glimpse of a way he could somehow get her back.

He knew he was being unrealistic.

Steve couldn't stop thinking about the night he let her go to Jonathan, their conversation replaying endlessly in his mind. It tortured him each time he now even looked at Nancy, or heard her voice; her presence was suddenly so unbearable that he couldn't stand it. It was true that he loved her still, and wanted her for himself - looking back at that night he almost couldn't believe he really said what he said. He just let her leave, and it was the hardest thing he'd ever done.

"You should go with him."

"What?"

"With Jonathan."

"No... I'm not just gonna leave Mike."

"He's leaving anyway. I may be a pretty shitty boyfriend but.. it turns out I'm actually a pretty damn good babysitter."

...

"...Steve.."

...

"..It's ok, Nance. It's ok."

But things hadn't been ok, not for him at least. He wanted to desperately tell her how much she meant to him, what he loved about her.. but he'd already seen the way she looked at Jonathan, and the way he'd always try to protect her. He knew the boy had liked her from the start, the whole *school* knew that, but he'd hardly considered him a threat.

I'm glad I broke his camera. Steve thought. Looking back, he didn't regret it.

A memory resurfaced from within, causing the fleeting second of triumph to drain out of him. His view of Nancy from inside his car back on the night of the Snow Ball... she had looked so beautiful then, smiling and greeting everyone that entered the gym, laughing at things people were saying.. When he knew he couldn't take it anymore, Steve had driven off into the night, away from it all. Away from the lights, and the music, and the girl he was once so close to, but now might as well've been a stranger.

Steve was driving now, to go pick up some stuff from the local gas station. It was pretty late, but this was one of the only times he could do what he wanted. The rest of it was spent at school, or dropping off kids, or crashing at home. Parking his car outside the tiny store, he went in to buy a can of Coke - it was a pretty warm evening and he needed something to cool down. After paying for the drink, the boy walked somewhat wearily back to his car and sat on the bonnet, staring up into the black expanse of sky.

The small popping sound that the can made when he opened it was

loud in the silence, and when he lifted the can to his lips the sugary taste of the soda was strong and unmistakable. It was his favourite, after all. However as he swallowed, he noticed another car pulling up to the gas station, the sound of a female laughter erupting from inside it. She didn't sound like she was his age, but older, and the boy sitting next to her was someone that Steve immediately recognised.

Billy Mayfield was sitting in the drivers' seat of the car, his head turned to face a woman that Steve thought he would vaguely knew, but couldn't figure out why. The two of them were laughing, but Steve couldn't hear what they were saying. He tried not to look at them, but instead attempted to figure out what was familiar about the woman from the corner of his eye.

He nearly spat out his Coke when he realised who it was.

Nancy's mother, who he had met and talked to! Nancy's mother, who was a married woman! Nancy's mother, who was presently in a high school student's car, with a high school student!

Steve sat frozen in the warmth of the night.

When he saw Mrs Wheeler lean in towards the other boy, Steve almost had a heart attack.

SMASH

Suddenly, a shatter sounded throughout the gas station, causing Mrs Wheeler, Billy and Steve to protest in shock. The boy with the near-famous hair had hurled his remaining Coca Cola can through the back window of Billy's car, obliterating it to nothing. After recovering from the shock of what he had just done, Steve flung open his car door and bolted out of the gas station as fast as he could, speeding down the road with Billy screaming curse words after him.

Steve knew that what had just happened right there, before anything else in his life, was the most fun he'd ever had.

6. Chapter 6

• Chapter Six: Pasta and Traffic lights •

• Chapter Six •

Pasta and Traffic lights

"What's it like? Having a girl like Jane for a daughter?"

JOYCE BYERS had left Jonathan at home, pretty much convinced he would be able to take care of himself, to go and have a platonic meal with the town's Chief, Jim Hopper. He'd asked her to join him a week ago, because he thought it might be nice. She'd said no at first, thinking that the intentions might be different, but after a day or two's consideration, she decided in the end to give it a shot. Sitting in the restaurant, though, Joyce did have to admit that the smells, warmth and music were a huge help to get her to relax a little. It had been practically impossible to live life as she normally would, which in itself was sort of lonely, but made even harder by the turn of recent events. Desperate to talk about something that had nothing to do with the danger of both her sons or the whole of Hawkins thinking she was nuts, the brunette woman asked Hopper a question she was curious of the answer to.

"Jane? God, it's gonna take a while for us to get used to that," He laughed, looking over the food on the menus. "She's a great kid, full of fire. Wouldn't trade her for the world."

Joyce smiled at that. Jane had always felt especially close to her heart, for everything she did to find her son, and the woman wanted nothing more than the certainty of that girl's safety. She was relieved that Hopper decided to adopt her, and overwhelmed too, as this girl who had seemed almost alien in the beginning would finally get a chance of a normal life, something Joyce felt was the least she deserved. Taking a sip of the tap water that had been served at their table, Joyce smiled again at Hopper. He really was a caring man.

"So, what did you want to order?" He asked. "I think I'll have a lasagna, the ones they do here are delicious. What do you want?"

Taking another look at the menu, Joyce coughed a little. "Um, I think the bolognese sounds good. I'll get that." She didn't have the heart to tell him that Italian wasn't her complete favorite choice of cuisine, so she kept quiet. However, when Jim Hopper put down his menu and did a double take, he put two and two together pretty quickly.

Closing the menu, he said: "Fancy some chips?"

Joyce responded with quite possibly the biggest smile ever.

.....

Leaning against the bonnet of Hopper's police truck while devouring fries, Joyce decided, was quite possibly one of the best feelings ever. The fries were still warm, despite the air getting a little chillier, and it was so simple and normal that the woman wanted to cry. She couldn't remember the last time life had felt this simple, or as nice.

"So, how you getting on? You know, without..." The Chief didn't want to risk mentioning Bob's name in front of Joyce, for fear that he would hurt her feelings. However, he desperately wanted to know if she was alright, and after all that's why he asked her for a meal in the first place, but when there was no reply he looked over at her.

The woman was looking off somewhere, maybe at the buildings, or the clouds, or the moon. Her eyes were sparkling slightly, damp from a few leaked tears, and her hair billowed around her face with her making no attempts to adjust it. She was just calmly quiet, and Hopper turned to look out onto that same view.

"It's worse than I thought it would be. He..." Joyce paused to wipe her eyes, "He didn't seem real, so when I finally realised he was, it was too late." Hopper wondered if he should say anything, but he kept quiet. "We've seen losses already... that poor girl, the friend of Nancy's... but I still thought, you know, we're not gonna lose anyone else. We can't let another life be cost."

Hopper looked away, knowing faintly what she meant. It had been unbelievably unbearable to deal with the death of his daughter, Sarah, and now this too... he pulled Joyce in for a hug, letting his tears spill silently on her shoulder. She was shaking with rage by the

time they pulled apart.

"Dammit!" She yelled in frustration, unaware of some people turning to look, unbothered. "We will *not* let this happen again, Hopper, we *can't*. I simply won't allow it." She stared at him, furiously brushing away several more tears. "Do you understand?"

The chief nodded, then after a moment, spoke. "We won't let this happen again. No one else should have to suffer."

They stared at each other for a few minutes, then nodded simultaneously, turning back to the sky and the traffic lights up ahead. An ambulance drove through them, while another car was forced to wait as the sirens faded to nothing. The chip packets picked up with the wind.

7. Chapter 7

• Chapter Seven: Mismatched Mysteries •

• Chapter Seven • Mismatched Mysteries

Mike knew something was wrong. When he realised for the first time he had woken up without his mother nagging him repeatedly, he couldn't decide if he should be relieved or worried. Relieved because he could finally have a lie in? Or worried because this was unusual?

After checking that all his friends were still asleep, Mike carefully treaded out of the basement. Sunlight that was as faint as mist was peeking through the windows, barely there, the trace of morning almost transparent. Mike didn't know why he had woken up so early, but he could take a lucky guess and say it was very early. He wasn't at all used to it.

Reaching the top of the stairs, he couldn't help but notice that the house was unusually quiet. Mike brushed it off, because who would be awake at this hour, surely? But it didn't put out the slowly growing fire of dread burning inside him. Turning to move upstairs, he was careful not to step on the planks that he knew were the loudest (because he was Mike Wheeler, and if he could stop a demogorgon alongside his friends, why couldn't he be a ninja too?) and reached the top having made barely any sounds at all. Approaching his parent's room, he bent down a little to look through the crack in the door – there, without fail, were both his parents snoozing in their bed. Mike very nearly let out a sigh of relief, but before he went back down to the basement, something told him to check his sister's room too, just in case.

It was strange that his mother hadn't woken him up, yes, but maybe Mike should stop worrying about small things that didn't particularly matter. After all, surely he was way too old for that sort of thing? The more he thought about it, the more it made sense.

Just when the boy had convinced himself that he was being stupid, he noticed that when he slowly pushed open the door to Nancy's

room, it was not what he had expected. There was no trace of his older sister, none at all, and panic rose in Mike's throat so fast he thought he was going to be sick. But then, she had to be in other rooms, right? He checked his own, the cupboard, the bathroom – then he bolted downstairs, finding no one in the kitchen or the lounge. The fear was unmistakable now – Mike didn't exactly *like* his sister very much, but if she'd disappeared just like on the morning Will had... the boy didn't want to think about the possibility of the Upside Down somehow returning into each of their lives, but what other explanation did he have? Unless his sister had deliberately gone out that night, for whatever reason, and something happened that caused her not to return?

Deciding to tell the others what happened, Mike was at the foot of the basement stairs when he heard the sound of a key in a lock. Whipping round, he saw the front door to his house open and watched as the person retracted their key from the lock, stepping in with worn out trainers and curly brown hair. Unmistakably Nancy. She shut the door behind her, taking off her coat and scarf before noticing her younger brother staring at her with something resembling both confusion and anger in his eyes. Before she could ask why, Mike took the opportunity to argue with her.

"Where were you? I thought you'd been taken away like the morning we realised Will had disappeared – what on earth are you doing?!"

It didn't take long for Nancy to respond with a cold glare that reflected her brother's quite a lot – something that didn't match the heat rising to her cheeks in flushed embarrassment. "I was simply taking a morning stroll, you should try it sometime."

Mike could tell when his sister was lying – he always could – and responded with a single raised eyebrow. It was a trick the boy had mastered in third grade, always using it to catch out people that he knew weren't telling the truth. It hadn't always worked of course, but the least it did was throw someone off – and that's exactly what happened to Nancy.

"Look, it doesn't matter... and why are you questioning me like some sort of inspector? I thought our parents were the ones that told us off, I don't see why you're getting so worked up."

"Because I'm worried about you!" Mike practically yelled into the peaceful silence of the early morning. Was it really so difficult for his idiotic sister to realise that when he had no idea where she was, he was going to be worried?

"Mike... what's going on?" Eleven had wandered up the stairs, rubbing her eyes like a toddler would with her hair sticking up at all angles – a sight that was so adorable Mike didn't know if he could take it so early in the morning. She had probably heard the raised voices, something that the boy felt guilty of, so he tried to persuade her to leave.

"Hey, El... listen, can you go back to the basement? I'll be down in a second, and I didn't mean to startle you... it's just Nancy, she-" He waved his hand in the general direction of his sister. "Is being a pain."

"I am not!" Nancy muttered, but her brother just shook his head, too irritated with her to bother arguing. He'd get the truth out of her soon, but for now his main focus was El, who had drifted into the kitchen in search of her all time favourite snack. After spending some time living with Hopper, she knew she had to get a plate and it didn't take her long to find the cutlery tray – but was left baffled when she couldn't find any food.

"Eggs?" She asked quietly. Mike simply laughed and opened the tallest cupboard where he kept his stash, then grabbed it and shoved two waffles in the toaster. Nancy went upstairs to her room, wearily combing through her hair with her skinny fingers. Eleven thought she looked exhausted.

Eleven knew what was troubling her.

"I think we keep the chocolate chips in here, do you want some with yours? El?" After a moment, Mike turned around when the girl didn't answer, but he saw she was heading upstairs. He shrugged it off, assuming she was looking for the bathroom, and decided to continue making their waffles himself with or without her help. He put as many chocolate chips as he could on hers.

8. Chapter 8

• Chapter Eight: Coca Cola and blackmail•

• Chapter Eight •

Coca Cola and Blackmail

set during the night before

STEVE HARRINGTON took off down the road, determined to get away. He didn't think an apology was necessary, considering what he'd just seen, and quite frankly he wasn't sure if he could look either of them in the eye. He was disgusted, and scared, and what if Nancy found out? How could they do this after so many people had struggled to fight the Upside Down?

But then he stopped. He remembered. They probably had no clue of what had happened, they only knew Hawkins as a slightly unreliable town. Steve doubted the Wheeler parents even cared when Will was allegedly found dead, and as for Max, Steve didn't want to imagine putting up with a brother so unbearably awful. There was a tiny part of him that felt a stab of triumph at the destruction of Billy's car window, though he certainly wasn't about to admit it. Driving down the road with no particular direction cleared his mind after a while, helping him to recover slightly from the shock of what he'd done.

Blue lights started to overlap with Steve's headlights on the stretch of the road, flashing continuously and getting brighter. He panicked at first, thinking the police might've come after him, but he watched as an ambulance took over, picking up speed. A sudden thought crossed his mind, something that not only confirmed his paranoia but sent cold sweat down his forehead. Without thinking, he followed the ambulance.

It really didn't take long for Steve's car to pull up outside the hospital, as Hawkins was a small town that didn't cover much space. The hospital was just down the road from the local town centre, and Steve followed the ambulance closely while he decided where to park. He watched from his window as the opened the doors, and nearly gasped at what he saw. There was Billy, and he was being

taken into the building by several paramedics, each of them paying close attention to his neck. Steve noticed that the other boy was holding a hand to it, trying to prevent blood from leaking through the gaps in his fingers. The whole sight made Steve feel a bit ill.

When he was sure that Billy, Nancy's mother and the rest of the hospital staff had gone inside, he followed. Steve had absolutely no idea how he could pull himself out of the situation, but if what he suspected were true then it wouldn't take long for him to start calling prison his new home. The mere thought sent shivers through him.

Upon entering the building, the boy made a beeline for the waiting room, certain that if he simply looked like a concerned loved one then nobody would question his presence. Making himself comfortable on a somewhat worn-out chair, he overheard raised voices from what he guessed was the room through the wall.

"Is this self-inflicted? What on earth actually happened? I tell you, we get all sorts round here but this? This isn't something I'm sure any of us are familiar with." Steve guessed the woman talking is a nurse, from her professional tone, despite her words. Somehow, too, he knows that what she's talking about must have something to do with Billy, and whatever reason he's here.

It's Nancy's mother who speaks next, and it's Steve who's almost eager to hear how she's going to deal with this. "I was just getting a bit of fresh air, you know? And then..." A moment of hesitation as the woman thinks things over in her head, the cogs in her brain whirring so quickly that she's certain someone will be able to hear them. "Some *person* decides that instead of throwing away their garbage like a perfectly reasonable human being, they're going to lob it elsewhere, and at that young man, of all people!" She trills, while Steve cautiously takes note of her word choice, at her phrasing. Of course, it's a relief that she didn't mention his name, but he doesn't reckon he has long before the blame is shifted to him... something the boy cannot, for the love of god, let happen to him. He can't be defeated by Billy, what an absolute joke! That shouldn't happen to anyone, he thought. He must come up with something.

"I know this is a shock to you miss, but you must remain calm and remember details of what happened clearly. Now, if you take a seat

in the waiting room, we'll shortly refer you to someone." The nurse said kindly but firmly, and without warning shoved Karen Wheeler into the hospital's small and dingy waiting room. The woman took a seat, an expression of bemused bewilderment illustrated on her face, before she locked eyes with the one person she was least expecting to be in Hawkins Hospital at this time of night.

Steve Harrington.

Confusion is swapped with fury as she noticed the boy, sitting slightly slumped at the opposite end of the room. He knows who she is, and why she's here, and in response to her thunderous expression the boy raised his left eyebrow.

Try me, I dare you.

The mom stood up abruptly and strided out of the room with a quick glance at Steve, as if to say, *you're coming with me young man*. Though he was not intimidated, he joined her anyway since he can't decide on anything at present that will result in his name being cleared. Grudgingly, he followed her into the narrow corridor outside.

"Do I need to ask why you're here?" The woman asked, anger like a roaring flame that only seems to grow in size after each passing moment. Despite himself, Steve gulped. He wondered if he had ever seen anyone so angry.

"Should I be saying the same for you?" He countered, far from giving in just yet. He needed to understand her reasoning.

"Don't be insufferable. Tell me why you're at this goddamn hospital, Harrington." At her use of his surname, Steve smirked a little. Funny, when adults think surnames are intimidating, he mused. Shame that they're just so... well, *not*.

"Listen, I don't know why you were with Max's brother at the gas station and I don't think I want to, but I'm at this hospital because I want to clear my name. You got it, lady?" The boy stated, talking quickly and speaking in a voice lower than usual. He looked around a couple of times, checking that there was no one around to listen in on their conversation. Relief flooded through him when it was confirmed

they were alone, and he turned back to Karen, focused only on whatever she had to say. The woman's glare faltered a little but remained.

"Or what?" She challenged, not prepared for what the Harrington boy had to say next. Karen was pretty sure she couldn't be tested, and certainly not by the likes of this boy, but she was wrong. Oh, how wrong she was indeed.

"Or," Steve breathed slowly, choosing his next words carefully. "I will tell *everyone* about who you were with tonight."

Her expression changed, her posture slumped in defeat. She knew he was not lying, and it would destroy her if this got out, destroy her family for sure. And just when she'd been connecting with the kids too, for what felt like the first time in years... no. She couldn't allow the truth to be unravelled, the ends of the yarn knotted and tangled by Steve's fingers. She just couldn't. Taking in a breath so deep it sent shivers through her, the words in her sentence tumbled out broken and messy.

"Alright." She choked, her voice cracking. "What do you propose?"

Hey everyone! So sorry it's taken a while to get this chapter up... I have a house guest, who is lovely, but she's currently my main priority! Thanks for sticking with it though, and I made sure this chapter was longer in case anyone wanted that. I haven't yet started drafting 9, but I will soon... just give me a bit of time until my guest leaves, then hopefully I should be able to get back on schedule, updating as often as I can. Once again, thank you so much for your views, follows, and comments – I didn't expect this much, and so suddenly!

-frecklesandconstellations x

9. Chapter 9

• Chapter Nine: Hushed secrets •

• Chapter Nine • Hushed Secrets

Eleven got to the top of the stairs, searching hastily for Nancy's room. She knew what troubling Mike's sister but didn't understand how to get to the bottom of it. After all, the girl was still trying to adapt to the way she'd seen others behave – she was still very far away from normality. However, the girl had a few years on her timeline now, years filled with friends and something close to family, as far as she knew. She was getting closer to something the average person would consider normal.

For now.

Peeking through the cracks of each of the doors upstairs, the girl tried to identify Nancy's room, and judging by the calm wallpaper and pastel bedsheets, Eleven concluded that this was what she had been looking for. Knocking lightly, she heard a faint murmur from the older girl inside – it sounded like an irritated "Come in."

Opening the door with one hand and brushing curls out of her eyes with the other, the younger girl stepped into the room. She'd been in here before, but it never failed to amaze her; the décor was so contrastingly different from Mike's room with posters of people she didn't recognise plastered across one wall and a pale blue phone sitting silently on the bedside table, patterned bedsheets, striped pink wallpaper and pale cream curtains framing the window behind the bed. Sitting on it was Nancy, her face hidden by her somewhat messy brown hair – posture slouched, hunched away from the door and presumably looking out the window, she was a picture of fatigue. The two girls remained silent for a small while, before Eleven anxiously cleared her throat.

"It's just me." She said, her voice close to a whisper. She pushed the door shut gently behind her, wanting their conversation to be private between them. Nancy turned around and allowed her actions; then

pat a spot next to her on the bed as an indication of where Eleven should sit. The other girl obliged and joined her.

"What's up?" Nancy asked, doing her best to keep the worry out of her voice. She didn't dislike Eleven, she was far from that – but with her abnormal powers and dark eyes it was difficult not to be a little frightened.

"You. Something's... bothering you. Something bad." Eleven barely spoke, trying her hardest to stop anyone else from overhearing the conversation. What would she do if Mike heard? The last thing she wanted was her friends knowing that there could be another problem on their hands, something huge...

Nancy looked away. She didn't know how Eleven knew, but she couldn't question it. The girl may be younger, but she was certainly stranger than anyone else Nancy had met, and for that she couldn't really be surprised.

"Tell me." The younger girl pressed on. Her voice was persistent, firm, demanding. Whatever Nancy was hiding, the barriers had been set down now... yet still she was hesitant and wary, still cautious of this girl. Her brother was obsessed with her, but her brother always had poor judgment... however, as the older girl turned her head she was met with Eleven's calm, dark eyes – something Nancy felt anyone could be comforted by. It wasn't much, but it was enough to set Nancy free of her doubts. She breathed air in so quickly it almost made her shiver.

"We're not safe, are we? We never are. Just when I thought things might be alright again, they decided not to be. It's like everything's trying to screw with our minds, drive us crazy." Nancy started slowly, her voice picking up pace until she'd finished her sentence. She whispered each word, but they were nearly a strangled cry by the end. Eleven thought Nancy was breaking in two.

In response to the other girl's frantic words, Eleven shook her head slowly. She didn't have to nod to show that she agreed with what she said, but she was shaking her head for another reason.

"No..." Eleven replied, keeping her voice low. "We can't be safe,

nothing can, unless we," She paused, browsing the limited dictionary of her mind to find the correct word, "fix, what's gone wrong."

"But I thought we had!" Nancy yelled, forgetting all rules of remaining quiet. Eleven winced at her pitch so Nancy leaned in, her words spitting out her mouth at millions of miles per hour. "I thought you had closed the gate and saved us from the Upside Down! Aren't we supposed to be safe? Wasn't that the reality?"

Eleven tried to suppress the hurt welling up inside her, an emotion she was all too familiar with. Even so, when a tear rolled down her cheek and she didn't bother to wipe it away, Nancy did it for her.

"...I'm sorry, I didn't mean to-" Nancy cut herself off, feeling like there was no point in continuing as Eleven already knew what she was going to say. Telepathic or not, the girl had powers unlike anything she'd ever seen and Nancy respected it. "What are we going to do?" She asked carefully, unsure of the younger girl's intentions. She knew if the other kids found out they would freak, but if they stayed silent perhaps the problem would only keep growing. The older girl chewed on a fingernail silently as she anticipated Eleven's reply.

"We wait." The girl responded after a moment, neutrality returning to her stony expression. "We say nothing, but if they ask... we don't lie."

"Friends don't lie." Nancy whispered, her gaze fixed solely on Eleven. She nodded, and took Nancy's freezing hands into her own.

"Friends... don't... lie."

Hello again! My guest left today, so I'm able to update once again! May not be able to get anything done this weekend though, as I'm going to a sleepover and have lots of work to catch up on... however, I'll defiantly try! I honestly cannot put into words how happy writing this fanfiction makes me, I literally get so excited whenever I'm busy typing lol. Thank you for reading thus far, and stay tuned.

-frecklesandconstellations xx

10. Chapter 10

• Chapter Ten: New Day's Dawn •

• Chapter Ten • New Day's Dawn

THE SOUND of the doorbell ringing was all it took for each of the six children to groan in irritation - the time had come; the fun was over and the sleepover was at an end. The kids exchanged eye rolls, all simultaneously wondering why adults had to be so boring. No one moved when Dustin's mother called down the basement steps for her son, thinking if they remained uncharacteristically quiet then the parents would just assume they'd vanished overnight.

However, when the steps began to creak with the weight of an adult walking down them, the group nodded.

"*Hide!*" Dustin hissed, and each of the children scrambled to find a decent, believable spot to remain undiscovered. Lucas and Will darted behind the sofa, Mike and Dustin headed for the shed in the garden, and Eleven along with Max found safety in the basement's bathroom, knowing if they locked it no one could get in from outside.

However, it wasn't long before Dustin was quickly discovered and extracted from his hiding place. The others emerged to say their goodbyes, and after that a flood of parents arrived to take their children home. With promises to arrange something similar again soon, the house was left almost deserted and Mike turned to his only friend who's parent hadn't arrived yet.

Max.

"I'm not making a face, I'm just wondering when you're going to go."

"Gee, thanks Mike. And I thought we were friends." The boy was about to protest, but he stopped himself when the redhead smiled. His expression relaxed.

"I'll just skate home - it's no big deal." She said. Mike couldn't help

but notice the edge in her voice faulted for a second as she looked away.

"Wait-"

"Max, your mother is here. Have you packed your things?" Karen Wheeler's voice still managed to be loud despite the way the basement caused everything to sound muffled.

"Yeah, I'll be up in a sec." She replied.

Mike turned to her once again - he cared deeply about all his friends and his worry for Max had only grown once he'd seen the behaviour of her brother.

"You gonna be ok?" He asked her.

The redhead turned to face him. For a second he could almost see the truth in her eyes, the reality of her situation highlighted there, but the moment passed and she smiled again, before nodding and leaving the basement.

Max knew something was wrong as soon as she saw her mother's face, a picture of apprehension and sorrow. They made eye contact.

"Honey, your brother.." She hesitated for a second. "Is in the hospital right now. I think he would appreciate a visit from his sister, so we're heading there soon. I'll be in the car - and don't forget to say goodbye to Mrs Wheeler as you leave." Mrs Mayfield then walked swiftly out the door.

Max turned around, only to find Mike's mother already standing there.

"Thank you for having me." Max stated, spinning her skateboard. The woman she was talking to hardly seemed like she was paying attention, however, as she kept staring at her fingers instead.

"Well, thanks, I guess." Max said, heading towards the front door.

"Wish your brother well, from me." Mrs Wheeler proclaimed, her tone of voice not quite matching her bright expression.

"...Sure." Replied the redhead, before turning to leave the house and the strange woman behind. She only hoped that her brother was in a coma, or some shit like that, so that he wouldn't have to boss her around for a while.

After stepping into her mother's car, they pulled out of the Wheeler's driveway and set off towards the hospital.

11. Chapter 11

• Chapter Eleven: Monkey Business •

• Chapter Eleven •

Monkey Business

NANCY WHEELER woke up because someone shook her awake. She never liked it when that happened and as a result wanted to slap whoever had done it.

Her resolve weakened a little, however, when she realised it was Jonathan.

"Hey." She smiled, ruffling the boy's hair. He rolled his eyes in irritation.

"My mum is gonna kill me if she finds out you're here." Was his reply. "I don't want you to leave, but you have to leave, OK? I'm sorry."

The girl stood up in response, digging around for her coat. When she'd finally found it, she put it on, kissed him briefly and then promised to visit again before exiting the bungalow.

She knew it wasn't far home and that the walk would be brief, so she set off down the road. However, she didn't expect to run into someone she knew on the way.

"Steve?"

It was a coincidence, she supposed, to encounter her ex-boyfriend so early on a Saturday morning. Nancy knew she probably would've ignored him, if it weren't for the fact that he was hanging from the branches of a tree by his legs like some sort of monkey, dangling enough to almost touch the ground.

The sight made her laugh.

"Hey, Nance. What are you up to?" He spoke.

"I think I should be asking you the same question." She replied,

curving her body to see him the right way up.

The boy with the most famous hair in Hawkins grinned, realising how difficult it was to shrug when he was upside down. Instead, he opted to reply with words.

"I dunno really. I think hanging around with kids 27/7 has turned me into one."

"Careful there, people are going to call you creepy."

"How could someone with my face ever be creepy?" Steve smiled.

Nancy rolled her eyes, realising that a year ago, her heart would've fluttered a little at a statement like that.

When he realised he wasn't going to get a reply, the boy pulled himself up and sat on the tree branch, now much higher above the ground. "Where are you heading?"

"Home." She smiled, recalling the previous night. "Gotta go make sure my brother isn't yelling into the Walkie-Talkie again."

"Ah, the kids of Hawkins." Steve expressed in a terrible trying-to-sound-posh accent. "What troubled specimens they are."

The girl suppressed a laugh. "Yeah. Hey, listen, I've got to go. But thanks!" She started walking away.

"For what?" Steve yelled from the branch.

Nancy grinned and turned around. "For hanging out."

.....

Steve watched her go. It was difficult, trying not to tell her what he had seen the previous night, but he knew he couldn't. After all, it would've ruined their conversation, and he didn't want to dig up any harsh feelings from her.

He wondered if her mother's secret would be kept for long - but in a small town like Hawkins, it was close to impossible to not know other

people's business. It was difficult to determine what her reaction might be like.. would she be disgusted? Relieved? Confused? Steve didn't have a clue.

Maybe she'd shut down. Nancy was a girl that he found puzzling to wrap his head around; when on the surface she had seemed so girly and weak, in reality she was the bravest person Steve had ever met. However, that didn't stop her emotions from going on complete lockdown from time to time, leaving him desperately trying to understand what she was feeling. When she fought for the younger kids, when she came to terms with Barb's death, and now this..

He had to do everything he could to stop her from finding out, even though he knew she had a right to know. But Steve saw what he was doing like how someone might decide to tell a white lie - it may be deceiving, but done with the person's wellbeing in mind.

The branches of the tree were sturdy and reliable, just what an experienced tree-climber looked for. Steve hauled his body through the different layers of the tree, leaves brushing his face as he went, until he could climb no further. Since he wasn't completely at the top, his view was somewhat clouded by foliage - but nonetheless Hawkins sat before him, carrying on its busy little suburban life as usual. Steve wasn't sure what he expected - despite the ridiculousness the town had experienced, it bizarrely remained the same squat, quiet little place. Perhaps it always would.

He shut his eyes and opened his mouth, taking in the fresh air from the nature around him. Sometimes, in all the madness, he had to remind himself to breathe.